Journal of Education, Society & Sustainable Practice, 2026, 3, 5–14
https://journals.enviromindsolutions.com/jessp
eISSN: 3070-6246

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Rural tourism and craft heritage: A case study of Charida mask-making village, Purulia, India

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Abstract

Rural tourism involves introducing tourists to non-urban areas where they can engage with local heritage and culture. While tourists can experience the essence of village life and culture, rural tourism also helps strengthen community identity and economic growth. Charida, a small village near the Ayodhya hills in Purulia district, West Bengal, India, is the principal hub of mask-making, primarily used in the traditional Chhau dance. Chhau has been inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List, and the mask has received global recognition. Charida, also known as Mask Village or the 'Mukhosh Gram', serves as a point of intersection between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. This study analyzes the pattern and growth of rural tourism in Charida. It understands how rural tourism has been influencing the livelihood and cultural heritage of the artisan community. The socio-economic data were collected through field visits, including interviews and a questionnaire survey. A purposive sampling process had been followed during the field visits. Charida is a notable example of how cultural heritage supports a rural economy and livelihoods. The traditional craft of Chhau mask-making has strengthened rural tourism, improved the socio-economic conditions, and enhanced the cultural recognition of the artisan community. The long-term sustainability of mask-making, however, depends on effective management practices, community participation, and balanced development planning.

Original Article

Article info

Received: 25 March 2026
Revised: 29 April 2026
Accepted: 1 May 2026
Published: 10 May 2026

Keywords

Rural tourism
Mask-making
Chhau dance
Cultural tradition
Transformation

How to cite

Mishra, A., Ghosh, S., Mandal, S.K. (2026). Rural tourism and craft heritage: A case study of Charida mask-making village, Purulia, India. Journal of Education, Society & Sustainable Practice, 3, 5–14. https://doi.org/10.63697/jessp.2026.10111

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1 Introduction

Rural tourism is a significant aspect of the Global economy, contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage and supporting the livelihoods of communities (Gao and Wu, 2017; Kataya, 2021). In India, rural tourism focuses on showcasing village life, traditional culture, and natural landscapes to visitors. It helped local economies by creating jobs, preserving cultural heritage, and improving the livelihood of rural communities (Chatterjee et al., 2024).

Purulia district, West Bengal, India, has received touristic attention for its amazing landscape, rich indigenous cultural heritage, and traditional craftsmanship (Palit et al., 2021). The village, Charida, has become popular over the years for its age-old tradition of Chhau mask making (Halder, 2024). The village is popularly known as 'Mukhosh Gram' or 'Mask Village'. It has become an amazing tourism destination and an important cultural hub for its age-old traditional craftsmanship. The artisans continue practicing the Chhau mask making and transmitting their skill through generations. These masks are used in the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) nominated traditional martial dance form, Chhau. Over the years, these masks are visible in various exhibition and festivals and has gained national and international recognition.

Das (2019) has discussed the etymology of the word 'Chhau' and the cultural heritage of Chhau dance. They also mentioned the 'pala' or 'narratives' that are enacted through the Chhau dancer's performance. Most of the stories are from the Hindu epic, mythology, tales, and folklore. The author suggests that these performances aim to maintain balance in the world. Halder (2024) focuses on the mask making community of Seraikella, Jharkhand, and Charida and discusses the connection between material and cultural heritage. Saha (2017) pointed out the history of Manbhum Chhow and the significance of the name. The author has discussed how the tribal people and the Sutradhar community together build the cultural ecology in Charida. Samal and Oraon (2023) discussed the tools and techniques used in the

mask making procedure. The price of masks and the performances that are adapted by the artisans have also been addressed. They continue discussing the transformation that the mask-making art has gone through. Chatterjee (2019) has discussed how the costumes and masks were created, linked with the martial dance form Chhau, and how this artifact making industry has adapted to different influences, market demand, and started to make a new type of masks, keeping the primary features as the base. Gupta and Mahato (2020) state the location-based distribution of Chhau mask showrooms and factories. They also discussed how the mask-making art is influencing the socio-economic blueprint and recommended a few developmental plans for this cottage industry.

Sharpley and Roberts (2004) have discussed how 'rurality' and rural tourism are defined and how they are interrelated. They have also discussed the sustainability that rural areas achieve as a result of rural tourism and how they become developed in a consistent manner. Butler (1980) states that the idea of a noticeable cycle in the development of tourist destinations makes use of a basic way to show how popularity is being shifted. They talks about potential future trends along with specific stages in the evolutionary sequences. Cohen (1988) states that the concept of authenticity is seen as negotiable rather than primitive, and the degree to which individuals define it depends on the type of experience they hope to have. They explains how, over time, new cultural developments may also have the appearance of authenticity. These literatures focus mainly on the techniques and procedure of mask making techniques, performative patterns of Chhau dance, and the influences on mask making and the coexistence of the residents. However, the discussion about the interrelationship of the Chhau mask and the increasing attraction of rural tourism towards Charida is lacking. Charida sets an encounter of the tourists with the living heritage of craftsmanship, natural landscape, folklore, and community life. The tourist experiences live mask-making in the workshops, interacts with the artisans, purchases handcrafted masks, and engages with the ambience. As a result, the tourism industry has influenced the socio-economic structures, the production, and the livelihood of the artisans.

The objectives of this study are: i) to analyze the pattern and growth of rural tourism in Charida, ii) to find out the influences of rural tourism on the livelihood and cultural heritage of the artisan community, iii) to analyze the transformation that the mask making craft has gone through, and iv) to find out the gender role that works in this field and the challenges they face.

2 Study area

Charida village (23°12' – 23°20' N latitude and 86°03' – 86°05' E longitude) is situated in the Sindri Gram Panchayat (GP) of Baghmundi Community Development (CD) Block of the Jhalda Subdivision, Purulia district, West Bengal, India (**Fig. 1**). It is situated in the South-Western part of West Bengal, near the border with Jharkhand. The Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western part of Charida village is bordered by Ajodhya GP, Baghmundi GP, Ghorabandha GP and Khirabera GP, respectively.

The geographical location puts Charida within the Chotanagpur plateau extension. The village features lateritic soil, Sal forests, low hills, and a dry climate. The history of Charida village is related to the development of Chhau masks, used in Chhau dance, and the cultural identity of Purulia district. During the late 18th and early 19th century, the Chhau dance form had started to gain popularity among the local people and Zamindars. The mask-making tradition started to evolve generation to generation, although it is hard to be specific about the exact time due to limited written records. The earliest name associated with the mask making tradition is Buddeshwar. He is assumingly the founding member since the local stories describe him as the first artist who invented the techniques of clay work, mold making, and paper layering that distinguish the masks from other regional variants. The descendants continued the practice and gradually established Charida as the hub of mask-making craftsmanship.

Fig. 1. Charida village.

3 Methodology

The secondary data were collected from various research articles, newspapers, videos, and data available on the scholarly database. The primary data has been collected during the fieldwork that was conducted in September 2023. The data related to the mask-making process, the communities, and their socio-economic conditions, along with the developmental factors, the problems they face, and their limitations, were collected through interviews. A questionnaire method and a non-participant observation method were used during the fieldwork. Purposive sampling was followed during the fieldwork.

4 Result and discussion

4.1 Pattern and growth of rural tourism in Charida

4.1.1 Development of rural tourism in Charida

Charida has experienced a remarkable change over the years, from a rural settlement to a center of cultural tourism. It was an agricultural community tucked away in the picturesque foothills of the Ajodhya hills. The most notable cultural feature is the ancient practice of creating Chhau masks, which is essential to the well-known Chhau dance of Purulia, West Bengal, India (Halder, 2024). The Chhau dance, a folk martial dance form, was included to the UNESCO representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010 (Ghosh et al., 2022). This recognition is deeply rooted in the cultural identity of Charida. Local residents have been creating these masks by hand for generations, which are generally used in performances that portray myths, folklore and epic stories. Because of the aesthetic value and cultural significance, the history of mask-making has established a solid basis for cultural tourism. Almost every household in this village makes masks.

The seeds of rural tourism were sown as knowledge and information of Purulia Chhau dance and the masks that go along with it had started to spread beyond Charida. Interest in the cultural surroundings, the dance, particularly the masks manufactured in Charida, increased after UNESCO's recognition. This has resulted in the growth of tourism as more tourists started to visit, eager to see the artisans in action and buy masks. The natural growth of rural

tourism has been strengthened over time by community initiatives and institutional support. In partnership with organizations like UNESCO, government agencies like the Department of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Textiles, Government of West Bengal, have tried to establish Charida as a hub for rural craft, supporting mask manufacturers, exhibitions and yearly events like the Chhau mask festival.

The Chhau mask was granted a Geographical Indication (GI) Tag, which significantly increased the potential of rural tourism. In addition to safeguarding authenticity, this recognition has increased marketability and visibility among both domestic and foreign tourists. The GI classification guarantees consumers authentic heritage products, and it frequently stimulates rural and cultural tourism. The GI designation has further preserved the craft's originality and raised its profile among collectors and cultural tourists.

4.1.2 Craft economy of Charida

In Charida, mask-making has been practiced for centuries and is intrinsically related to the identity, economy, and cultural life of the village (Halder, 2024). This serves as the primary means of subsistence and social organization, in contrast to villages with diverse occupational patterns. The growth of Chhau dance is intimately linked to the origins of mask creation in Charida. In Chhau performances, masks serve as a tool that establishes character, emotion, and narrative, in addition to being a mere ornamental item. The artisans have become essential cultural producers as the demand for Chhau performances has spread across the region. They have progressively turned their artistic talent into a stable source of income (**Fig. 2**). The majority of the respondents and their family members are willing to pursue mask-making as their primary source of income. Mask-making has significantly increased the number of tourists to the region (Banerjee et al., 2011; Palit et al., 2021). The artisan family members engage themselves in various stages of the manufacturing process, including clay modeling, paper layering, drying, painting, and decoration. Skills, techniques, and knowledge are passed down through generations verbally and through practice. According to the respondent artisans, the income patterns vary over the seasons, which typically peak from November to February.

In response to market conditions, the production of masks has increased. These includes decorative masks, wall hangings, big sculptures, and souvenirs, while presenting the visual language and iconography implanted in the Chhau tradition. This increase not only supports the livelihood of mask makers but also other vendors, tour guides, and transportation services. Exhibitions, craft fairs, and government initiatives have created new opportunities for economic activity and identity. The increased visibility of the Chhau mask is linked to its recognition in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List and has also received both

Fig. 2. Artisans making masks.

national and international attention (Ghosh et al., 2022). The craft strengthens creative values, ritualistic knowledge, and collective memory.

Over the years, Charida has faced both benefits and difficulties because of rural tourism. Direct sales, workshops and cross-cultural encounters have given craftsman new revenue streams due to the inflow of tourists, particularly during festive seasons. Instead of being remote or passive, tourism now takes place in the streets themselves, where visitors can watch the mask-making process and engage with artisans. However, recent reports indicate that the anticipated economic gains for mask producers during peak seasons have been influenced by variations in visitors' foot traffic, underscoring the necessity of sustainable tourism planning and market connections to stabilize benefits for local populations.

4.2 Impacts of rural tourism on the livelihood and cultural heritage

4.2.1 Cultural recognition and tourism foundation

The inclusion of Chhau dance in the UNESCO's list and the GI tag to the Chhau mask has seen a positive impact on tourism development in the region. Almost every household in Charida produces masks. The home-cum-open air workshops of the artisans can be easily accessed by the tourists (**Fig. 3**). On the other hand, these designations formally link the craft to the village's legacy and increase its visibility to the outside market. The mask, as a genuine cultural good, has received consumer's confidence both nationally and internationally. The micro, small and medium enterprises have helped in the construction of a rural craft hub. This has further helped the craftsman with innovation in products, capacity building, and tourism-integrated livelihood. Rural and cultural tourism has grown over the years, including yearly celebrations, community museums and exhibition that highlight the history and method of mask making. These events had helped merging folk art enthusiasts and rural tourists as the target tourists to this village.

4.2.2 Growth in artisan participation and youth engagement

The tourism has created significant economic prospects, especially for younger artisans and business owners. Survey data revealed that the masks manufacturers can earn up to Rs. 20,000 a month, with an average of Rs.12,500 a month. Many young adults have inspired by this growth to remain in the village, pursue a career in mask-making and promote sales. According to rural

Fig. 3. Open-air workshop.

tourist trends in West Bengal, the visits to Charida are on the rise. The demand for local guides, homestays, workshops and marketing has increased due to the increased flow of tourists. This has resulted in rise in employment and entrepreneurship. The young artisans use digital media to expand craft's commercial reach. Opportunies to participate in fairs in big cities like Kolkata, Delhi and Jaipur as well as abroad in countries like Russia, Germany and the United Kingdom, have been made possible by the exposure from tourism. Many young adults combine traditional craft with contemporary e-commerce by showcasing mask-making techniques and selling goods directly to a larger consumer base through social media and online shops. They have experienced a revitalized sense of pride because of the interaction between tourism and culture. More young people are opting to learn and preserve the craft, not just as a hobby, but as a possible career, as tourism continues to draw attention to Chhau art and related festivals. This passion promotes rural livelihoods, ensures the intergenerational transfer of indigenous skills, and fortifies cultural identity.

4.2.3 Community development

The local community, especially the traditional Chhau mask-making artisan families, has benefited greatly from the growth of rural tourism in Charida. Artisans transitioned from being isolated producers reliant on intermediaries to direct participants in tourism-driven economic activities as tourism grew. Collective engagement has increased due to community-based programs like live mask-making demonstrations, guided village tours and cooperative workshops. The survey data indicate that around 85% of the households either directly or indirectly participate in tourism-related activities, such as craft manufacturing, sales, cultural performances and guest engagement, which gives the villagers a strong sense of self-reliance and ownership. The rural tourism has greatly improved livelihood diversification and income stability. Mask making used to be mostly seasonal and reliant on Chhau dance performance, but it has also received national recognition, elevating its cultural and economic significance beyond local contexts (**Fig. 4**). Due to the increase in tourism, artisans can make money all year round via direct sale to the visitors, workshops, exhibitions and online purchases. Our field data indicate that the average monthly income of artisans has increased by over 40% during the last ten years, which has decreased the economic burden. To promote inclusive economic empowerment, women and older family members are now actively involved in painting, finishing, packaging and visitor engagement. One of the most obvious results of Charida's rural tourist development is better infrastructure. Road communication between Charida and other towns like Purulia and Baghmundi has been upgraded to handle the

Fig. 4. National award-winning mask.

increasing number of tourists, making the village more accessible with assistance from government rural development programs and tourism departments. The development included improved basic utilities like paved roads, drainage, electrical supply, and sanitary facilities. Both the daily quality of life for locals and the experience of tourists has been improved by these infrastructural upgrades.

4.2.4 Infrastructural support

Institutional and governmental support have further strengthened community empowerment by providing resources, policy frameworks, and infrastructure. NGOs, cultural organizations, and state agencies have training programs, marketing initiatives, financial literacy, and innovative craft design that enable local participation and sustainable development initiatives. Women artisans have access to equal revenue exposure at fairs and craft shows and are strengthened through leadership and business skills training. Such empowerment is consistent with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of equal involvement in decision making and access to economic resources. SDG 5 acknowledges the contributions of women and provides them with cooperative models, market connections and training programs. SDG 8 encourages productive employment, dignified work for all, and inclusive economic growth. It places a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship, fair pay, job opportunities, and assistance for small and medium-sized businesses. It has provided better income opportunities for the artisans. SDG 11 seeks to preserve cultural and indigenous heritage. The archiving and preservation of traditional mask-making is made possible by the aligned policy. SDG 12 aims at more usage of natural resources and reducing wastage.

4.3 Transformation of masks made in Charida

With the growing demands of the market, artisans have undergone a transformation in their art. Primarily, the masks were used only in Chhau dance performances. Recently, they have explored the decorative periphery. The artisans sell a variety of masks that are used as wall hangings and room decorations. The mythical and historical characters were generally portrayed in masks in the first place. In recent years, the South Indian deities have been the theme of those masks. Even after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, a mask portraying Coronasura can be observed (Purkayastha, 2020). In the case of the usage of tools and techniques, some changes have happened. Artisans use more chemical colors; modern tools have replaced the indigenous tools to meet the market demand.

4.4 Challenges and limitations

4.4.1 Limited infrastructure and accessibility

The absence of infrastructure is one of the main barriers to sustainable rural tourism for mask-making communities of Charida. Poor road connectivity, energy crisis, lack of portable water, and inadequate public transportation are some of the issues that discourage tourists from visiting these places.

4.4.2 Economic and financial restraints

Financial investment is necessary for the development of sustainable tourism, but rural areas have historically faced challenges due to low-income levels, a lack of capital and insufficient financial support networks. In a community where masks are made, local artisans might not have access to financing, investment networks, or business training to expand their tourism offerings. Earnings frequently fluctuate due to seasonal demand variability, which can exacerbate financial disparities and limit local capacity to reinvest in infrastructure or tourism-related assets. Long-term planning is hampered by these financial constraints, which also erode the economic resilience required for the expansion of sustainable tourism.

4.4.3 Skill gaps and lack of human resource

The dearth of managerial experience and qualified human resources is a major problem in rural tourism. Despite having no professional experience in hospitality management, digital

marketing, or customer service, many villagers may be experts in the traditional crafts. This lowers the ability to use new technologies for booking, payments, or outreach, degrades product packaging and promotion, and affects the quality of the service experience. Without enough skill development, a craft-based tourism model might not draw tourists or provide them with satisfactory service, which would affect the business.

4.4.4 Commercialization versus cultural preservation

Tourism carries the risk of cultural commodification and identity loss, even while it might rekindle interest in traditional creative forms. Despite meeting the expectations of tourists, villages like Charida are under pressure to offer an 'authentic' experience. This can result in staged or diluted cultural activities if not handled appropriately, which would undermine their long-term worth and true societal significance. An excessive emphasis on transient financial benefits (such as souvenir sales) can erode social cohesiveness and change customs in ways that alienate locals.

4.4.5 Environmental and resource management

Although many rural destinations exist in this area, sustainable rural tourism must strike a balance between visitors' influx, resource management, community participation, environmental stewardship, and preserving environmental quality (Chatterjee and Datta, 2024). If proper mechanisms are not in place, more tourism can increase waste output, put a strain on water supplies and disrupt local ecosystems. Unchecked environmental effects can deteriorate the natural and cultural environments that first draw tourists to craft communities, where tourism related growth frequently happens without formal planning. Developing waste management systems, protecting the environment and teaching locals and tourists about sustainability are crucial but frequently underfunded aspects of developing rural tourism.

5 Conclusion

This study emphasizes the intricate connection between traditional crafts, rural tourism, and local subsistence. Charida is an illustration of how tangible and intangible heritage can coexist to create a viable rural economy. In addition to preserving the region's artistic character, the centuries-old custom of making masks for the martial folk dance Purulia's Chhau has made the village a major center for rural cultural tourism. Chhau's exposure and market value have significantly increased since UNESCO added it to its representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity and the GI tag. In addition to drawing academics, tourists, and craft purchasers from all around India and overseas, these accolades have bolstered the sense of cultural pride among craftsmen. The rural tourism has helped Charida's infrastructure, youth engagement, women's participation, economic opportunities, and diversification of livelihood. The viability of rural tourism in Charida is questioned due to factors such as market-driven production pressures, commercialization of cultural expressions, unequal benefit distribution, infrastructure constraints, and environmental concerns. Rural tourism has improved the socioeconomic standing of the artisan community and given them cultural recognition, but its long-term viability depends on sustainable management, community involvement, and well-balanced planning. Policies pertaining to tourism must incorporate skill development, infrastructure development, fair benefit sharing, and environmental consciousness to guarantee that financial advantages do not jeopardize cultural integrity. Charida is a symbol of the complexity and promise of rural tourism. However, to guarantee that the living tradition of mask-making endures for upcoming generations, sustainable tourism should prioritize social justice, cultural preservation, and ecological responsibility.

6 Ethical statements

Informed consent was obtained from all survey participants prior to data collection. Personal information was anonymized and coded to protect participants' identities and prevent the disclosure of sensitive information.

7 Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study.

8 Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

9 Author contributions

A. Mishra: Formal analysis, investigation, methodology, and writing – original draft. S. Ghosh: writing – review & editing. S.K. Mandal: Conceptualization, supervision, and writing – review & editing. The authors approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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